

Happy Prince Introduction to the OSCHOLARS Online Annotated Edition

By Naomi Wood and Luke Redington

September 2010



If Oscar Wilde had not written fairy tales, an explanation might be in order as to how his monumental imagination, immersed in Oxford's literary milieu during the golden age of fairy tales, failed to embark on such a fanciful endeavor. After all, John Ruskin (1819-

1900), Lewis Carroll (1832-98), and other Oxford luminaries produced fairy tales alongside serious academic treatises. But in 1888, Wilde produced *The Happy Prince and Other Tales*, a collection of five short stories whose vast imaginative scope raises many questions: For whom are these stories intended? (Wilde's own answer that "they are meant for children of all ages," only highlights the complexity of his intentions.) In which literary traditions is Wilde participating, and which ones is he subverting? Given that this collection was praised by contemporary reviewers and the public, and that it has remained in print and continues to find audiences, why does it now receive relatively little attention from biographers and critics?

This annotated edition of *The Happy Prince and Other Tales* seeks to engage these questions, and like all projects involving Wilde, its outcome is molded by assumptions about the relationship between his life and his art. Because Wilde inverted conventional notions about the relationship between life and art, and because he himself set the example of interpreting his own life as an expression of his art, conventional distinctions between biography and literary scholarship do not neatly apply. Yet too often scholars make the inverse error of failing to distinguish between Wilde's art and his life. This edition attempts to hold the two ideas in tension. First, the study of Wilde's work and the study of his life are separate endeavors too important to conflate. Second, there are instances where one can uniquely illuminate the other, and therefore ought to be expounded.

This edition is also born of the need to remedy the dearth of scholarship on Wilde's fairy tales. Only two annotated editions of *The Happy Prince and Other Tales*

exist in wide circulation: *The Complete Shorter Fiction of Oscar Wilde* (Oxford, 1979), annotated by Isobel Murray, and *The Annotated Oscar Wilde* (Orbis, 1983). Since Hyde's notes adopt much of Murray's material, and since Oxford would reissue an expansion of their 1979 edition in 2010 under the editorial guidance of John Sloan, this effort can and should be seen as a part of the thread of thought which Isobel Murray began over thirty years ago. Even in the annotated editions, only "The Happy Prince" has received much attention; the other tales have been reproduced without comment. One outstanding exception in this critical neglect of the tales is the monograph of Jarlath Killeen, *The Fairy Tales of Oscar Wilde* (2007), to which this online annotated edition is deeply indebted. Offering valuable insights into the multifaceted literary and cultural heritage behind these tales, Killeen's analysis definitively settles any debate about whether these works belong on the same shelf as *The Importance of Being Earnest* (1895), *De Profundis* (1949), and Wilde's essays. We especially thank Professor Killeen for his contribution of annotations and an introduction to "The Selfish Giant" in this project.

Part of the difficulty facing critics of Wilde's fairy tales is a pervasive assumption among both critics and the general public that children's literature and fairy tales are not complex enough to warrant interpretation--to do so invites the kind of ridicule levied by Frederick Crews' *The Pooh Perplex* (1963) and *Postmodern Pooh* (2001), both of which mobilize the heavy machinery of literary theory to render "innocent" texts problematic and perverse, the point being that *of course* such texts could be no such thing, and it is only the theoretical machinery that produces the perversity. Although this dismissive

attitude towards children's literature and its serious analysis has altered somewhat with the phenomenal popularity of J.K. Rowling's Harry Potter series (1997-2007) and the critical success of Philip Pullman's *His Dark Materials* (1995-2000), still, in America and elsewhere, most people expect children's literature to mimic Disney and children's television by avoiding any "dark" topic (such as death or unrequited desire) and faithfully delivering a happy and heteronormative ending. In mainstream children's texts, the main characters are not subject to death or despair, and the plots resolve safely with all the main characters intact and successful, usually sharing a jolly laugh. By contrast, stories in *The Happy Prince and Other Tales* end with the protagonists' death by self-sacrifice, or drowning, or combustion, and their accomplishments frequently seem questionable, even pointless.

When Wilde seeks laughter rather than tears from his audience, he uses ironic juxtaposition and understatement rather than the broad slapstick favored by the Disney Corporation and other children's programming. "The Devoted Friend," for example, simultaneously lampoons the fluidity with which the meaning of the word "friend" can be reversed, the Miller's unshakable unawareness of his own hypocrisy, and the absurdity of Little Hans' excessive sense of "duty" to the wealthy miller. Four of the five stories have ironic titles, and even the most conventional fairy tale tropes have ironic twists -- the Selfish Giant is a grasping philistine rather than a cannibalistic monster; love between a boy and a girl is fleeting, superficial, and subordinated to larger concerns; the sacrifice of life for love is not only unrewarded but, even worse, unrecognized.

Wilde further frustrates twenty-first-century Disneyfied expectations of children's literature with extensive use of Decadent motifs and allusions to *fin-de-siècle* social and artistic debates about economic injustice, political hypocrisy, and the value of art. Wilde's "poems in prose," as Pater called them, reference Orientalist lyrics by Théophile Gautier, classical pederastic imagery, and other distinctly unchildish texts. The stories' depiction of the tragic consequences of class inequality and selfishness challenge the blandly bourgeois assumptions of most literature for children that hard work, kind intentions, and "the wish your heart makes" (Disney's *Cinderella* [1950]) will inevitably produce material success and true love.ⁱ

The Background

Despite their departures from conventional (twentieth-century) notions of what is appropriate for children, Wilde's fairy tales, particularly "The Happy Prince" and "The Selfish Giant," have never been out of print and continue to be produced in beautifully illustrated books.ⁱⁱ Published in May 1888 by David Nutt, *The Happy Prince and Other Tales* was illustrated by Walter Crane and Jacomb Hood, both well-regarded illustrators. The collection was reviewed positively in (adult) periodicals. In September 1888, the *Athenaeum* praised its similarity to the stories of Hans Christian Andersen, and noted that "There is a piquant touch of contemporary satire which differentiates Mr. Wilde from the teller of pure fairy tales; but it is so delicately introduced that the illusion is not destroyed and a child would delight in the tales without being worried or troubled by their application, while children of larger growth will enjoy them and profit by them." In his

notice for the *Saturday Review*, Alexander Galt Ross called *The Happy Prince* a collection of "fables" rather than fairy stories, and noted that it was likely to appeal to a class of "persons who can appreciate delicate humour and an artistic literary manner," but that that class would "assuredly not be composed of children" (20 October 1888)ⁱⁱⁱ. Ross's assumptions notwithstanding, Oscar Wilde more than once cited his sons as the occasion for the telling and writing of the stories, and his son Vyvyan recalled his father telling the stories--only "The Selfish Giant" is specifically named-- to him and his brother Cyril (Holland 1954 53-54). Wilde also told "The Happy Prince" to an enthusiastic group of Cambridge undergraduates in 1885 (Ellmann 253), and made sure that his Oxford professors John Ruskin and Walter Pater received copies of the work. Wilde himself described the tales to G.H. Kersley, as "meant partly for children, and partly for those who have kept the childlike faculties of wonder and joy, and who find in simplicity a subtle strangeness" (15 June 1888, *Letters* 1962, 219).^{iv} Wilde was famous for his story-telling ability, and he told stories to all in his multifarious acquaintance--not only to his sons. During the height of his fame and notoriety and before his imprisonment for sodomy, Wilde entertained cohorts of aesthetic young men with provocative and subversive imitations of folk tales and legends, including a veritable "sceptic's history of popes and saints" (Ellmann 377). Throughout this most fertile period of his creative life, Wilde experimented with the possibilities and limits of the form of the fairy tale. He envisioned no age limit for the tales, and saw them offering a range of aesthetic experiences from child-friendly "wonder and joy" to more ambiguous "subtle strangeness."

Wilde was not alone among his contemporaries in his claim that fairy tales could appeal to adults as well as to children, and that anyone could take pleasure in them. George MacDonald, author of *Phantastes* (1858), *Lilith* (1895), *At the Back of the North Wind* (1871), *The Princess and the Goblin* (1871), and other fantasies, likewise insisted that the audience for fairy tales was not to be limited to children: "I do not write for children, but for the childlike, whether of five, or fifty, or seventy-five" (1893 317). The criterion of "childlikeness" used by both Wilde and MacDonald references children's openness to possibility, their ability to suspend disbelief, and does not therefore exclude adults from the pleasures offered by fairy tales. Despite his general attitude towards prudery and moralism, however, Wilde could be sensitive to and anticipate audience concerns, as when he wrote to Jacomb Hood, the illustrator of *The Happy Prince*, noting that "Crane's little boy has nothing on, as well as I remember, but your children can be just as you like: perhaps clothes might be advisable" (early 1888, *Letters* 215). Hood eventually included the image of a nude boy in a group of toga-clad children at the beginning of the chapter headings.^v

At the same time, writers of literary fairy tales sought readers among adults as well as children. Charles Dodgson (Lewis Carroll) sent copies of *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* (1865) to adult friends, and the book was reviewed in adult journals such as *The Athenaeum*, which expressed doubts about *Alice's* juvenile appeal: "We fancy that any real child might be more puzzled than enchanted by this stiff, over-wrought story" (16 December 1865 844). The reviewer's dubious response to the offering was echoed by later reviewers' assessment of Wilde's *A House of Pomegranates* as "unsuitable for

children" because of its pictures, style, and content (*Pall Mall Gazette* 30 November 1891 3). Ironically, many critics use *The Athenaeum* review of *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* as evidence for critics' blindness, whereas the criticism made of Wilde's tales is taken as the reverse. The extent to which a fairy tale is "for" children continues to be an open question and one that by no means closes off interpretive possibilities.

The Romance as a genre was very much in the critical conversation during the 1880s and 90s, part of an ongoing debate about mimesis, representation, and literary value. In essays such as "The Decay of Lying" (1889) and "The Critic as Artist" (1890) and in the "Preface to *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1891), Wilde sided with those who promoted Romance (such as Robert Louis Stevenson and Andrew Lang, both Scotsmen) and those who advocated Realism (such as Henry James and George Moore). As Felicity Hughes (1978) has shown, one unintended consequence of the debate was the enrichment of children's literature by writers temperamentally drawn to fantasy and fairy tales, but cordoned off from so-called "adult" literature because of the genres in which they worked. Though James, Moore, and their ilk succeeded for a time in separating the notion of "serious" literature from that of Romance, and privileging Realism as inherently more "mature" than Romance, Wilde's criticism challenged that notion wittily and pungently, as he did in the famous epigrams introducing *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, where he writes: "The nineteenth century dislike of Realism is the rage of Caliban seeing his own face in a glass. / The nineteenth century dislike of Romanticism is the rage of Caliban not seeing his own face in a glass" (1891 x).

Wilde was acknowledged by all to be a master raconteur; the fairy tales signaled a transition from poetry to prose, from lecture to fiction. Although he lamented to an aspiring novelist, J.S. Little, on 15 January 1888 that "I wish that I could write a novel, but I can't" (*Letters* 214), the fairy tales provided Wilde with a form to explore the possibilities of dialogue, plot, and setting that he put to such good effect in *Picture of Dorian Gray*, his dramas, even his criticism. In letters about *The Happy Prince and Other Tales*, Wilde described the collection more than once as "studies in prose," suggesting that they were efforts to expand his artistic range as much as they were offering valuable life lessons (as the cliché goes) to children--or adults.^{vi} To Leonard Smithers, he wrote:

The story is an attempt to treat a tragic modern problem in a form that aims at delicacy and imaginative treatment: it is a reaction against the purely imitative character of modern art--and now that literature has taken to blowing loud trumpets I cannot but be pleased that some ear has cared to listen to the low music of a little reed" (13 July 1888 *Letters* 221)^{vii}

If the tales are truly exercises in expression, exploring the possibilities offered by a non-mimetic literary form, then we are justified in exploring the full range of meaning suggested by Wilde's language and reference. As Wilde wrote to W.E. Henley in late 1888, "Beauty of form produces not one effect alone, but many effects. Surely you do not think that criticism is like the answer to a sum? The richer the work of art the more diverse are the true interpretations" (*Letters* 234).

Notwithstanding Wilde's aestheticism and his association with the "art for art's sake" movement, the fairy tales also comment on contemporary social ills and political responses. Hunger and want haunt "The Happy Prince," while the Miller in "The Devoted Friend" mouths the smug platitudes of the comfortable to justify the exploitation of his dear friend Little Hans. (Killeen has shown how closely the Miller's language mirrors the English response to Irish starvation during the Great Famine [2007 83-84]). Wilde attended meetings of the Fabian Society in 1888, and wrote "The Soul of Man Under Socialism" (1891) in partial response to what he heard. In this, his last essay, Wilde's epigrammatic claims--"Charity creates a multitude of sins" or "To the wickedness of the Papacy humanity owes much"--are characteristically paradoxical and recall the "Modest Proposal" (1729) of his fellow Irishman Jonathan Swift. Such sentiments may seem unpalatable, but as Slavoj Žižek has shown in ["First Tragedy, Then Farce"](#) (2009), Wilde's argument is that the palliative work of charity simply prolongs the agony of the poor without seriously addressing the structural inequities producing poverty in the first place. Moreover, in his insistence upon the importance of individualism and pleasure as an essential part of a utopian economy, Wilde challenges the socialism that would mandate equality at the expense of excellence or beauty. As Carolyn Lesjak has argued, Wilde "imagin[es] . . . through Art, an expanded notion of needs and use which privileges pleasure and the imagination over utility" (2000 180). In the fairy tales, these ideas are filtered through image, paradox, and juxtaposition.

Taking our cue from Wilde's descriptions and from those who have treated the tales with respect and attention, our annotations and notes seek to reinforce the tales'

connections to other works of children's literature and to fairy tales while also exploring their "subtle strangeness," the estranging "queerness" that permeates Wilde's work and makes it such a rich field for study. For those who wish to explore further the critical record of the tales, we heartily recommend Jarlath Killeen's stimulating work *The Fairy Tales of Oscar Wilde* (2007) and the essays and bibliography of the tales on OSCHOLARS's special issue on the subject, "A Giant's Garden."

This edition

The manuscript of *The Happy Prince and Other Tales* was rejected by Macmillan and Co. in January 1888, before David Nutt agreed to publish the work. It was released in May of that year. The publishing firm of David Nutt was actually headed by Alfred Nutt (son of David), and was also involved in the publication of the journal of the Folk-Lore Society (established 1878). Alfred Nutt was a folklore enthusiast, and may have heard echoes of folk motifs and themes in Wilde's stories.

Coinciding with the publication of the first edition was a special collector's edition on hand-made paper. Only seventy-five copies were printed; they were signed by the author. (Espey 1977 ix).

ⁱ This is not to say that even bourgeois children's literature is not worthy of attention in analysis--rather, that paying attention to the interplay between literary form and ideology (among other things) in children's literature is intellectually and aesthetically worthwhile.

ⁱⁱ One of the most beautiful and sympathetic recent editions is Michael Hague's *The Fairy Tales of Oscar Wilde* (New York: Henry Holt and Co., 1993).

ⁱⁱⁱ Both reviews can be found in *Oscar Wilde: The Critical Heritage*. Ed. Karl Beckson, New York: Barnes & Noble, 1970, pp. 60-61.

iv Wilde, like other authors of fairy tales and fantasy, broaches the limits and boundaries placed around children's literature by parents and educators (children themselves are far more catholic in their tastes than they are given credit for being). C.S. Lewis, George MacDonald, and other less sensationally notorious writers have expressed similar sentiments.

v See the Table of Contents appended to the Dedication to Carlos Blacker.

vi Letters to G.H. Kersley, June 1888, *Letters* 219, and to Harry Melvill, June 1888 *Letters* 220.

vii According to Hart-Davis, Wilde later presented Smithers with the manuscript of "The Happy Prince" (*Letters* 221 n. 2).

The text for this edition has been taken from Project Gutenberg's [transcription](#) of the seventh edition of *The Happy Prince* (1910), transcribed by David Price, and proofread by Paul Redmond. The Project Gutenberg transcription has been compared with the first edition of 1888 by D. Nutt of London. Page numbers and transitions of the first edition have been added to the text. Any differences have been noted.

Works Cited

Beckson, Karl, Ed. *Oscar Wilde: The Critical Heritage*. New York: Barnes & Noble, 1970.

Ellmann, Richard. *Oscar Wilde*. London: Penguin Books, 1988. Originally published by Hamish Hamilton, 1987.

Espey, John. "Preface." *The Happy Prince and Other Tales and A House of Pomegranates*, by Oscar Wilde. New York: Garland, 1977. v-ix.

Hart-Davis, Rupert. *The Letters of Oscar Wilde*. London: Rupert Hart-Davis Ltd, 1962.

Cited in text and notes as *Letters*.

Holland, Vyvyan. *Son of Oscar Wilde*. London: Rupert Hart-Davis, 1954.

Hughes, Felicity. "Children's Literature: Theory and Practice." *ELH* 45.3 (1978) 542-61.

Hyde, Montgomery. *The Annotated Oscar Wilde*. London: Orbis, 1982.

Killeen, Jarlath. *The Fairy Tales of Oscar Wilde*. Aldershot, Hampshire: Ashgate, 2007.

Lesjak, Carolyn. "Utopia, Use, and the Everyday: Oscar Wilde and a New Economy of Pleasure." *ELH* 67 (2000) 179-204.

MacDonald, George. "The Fantastic Imagination." *A Dish of Orts*. London: Sampson Low, Marston & Co., 1893. 313-22.

Murray, Isobel. *The Complete Shorter Fiction of Oscar Wilde*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1979.

Review of *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*, *The Athenaeum* 16 Dec. 1865, 844.

Wilde, Oscar. "Preface," *The Picture of Dorian Gray*. 1891. *The First Collected Edition of the Works of Oscar Wilde*. Rpt. London: Dawsons of Pall Mall, 1969. ix-xi.

Wood, Naomi, Ed. "A Giant's Garden: A Special Fairy Tales Issue." *OSCHOLARS* Spring 2009. <http://www.oscholars.com/TO/Specials/Tales/Intro_Wood.htm>.

Zizek, Slavoj. "First Tragedy, Then Farce" 24 Nov. 2009. RSA Animate <<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hpAMbpQ8J7g>> Accessed 24 Sept 2010.